

FEDERAL PARENT LOCATOR SERVICE

In the United States today, nearly one-third of all children are growing up in single-parent homes. Of all families owed child support, only half receive the full amount due, and a quarter receive nothing at all. The goal of the Child Support Enforcement (CSE) program, established in 1975 under Title IV-D of the Social Security Act and thus referred to as the IV-D program, is to ensure that children receive financial and emotional support from both parents.

Designed as a joint federal, state, and local partnership, the child support program involves 54 separate state and territory systems, each with its own unique laws and procedures. The program is usually run by state and local human service agencies, often with the help of prosecuting attorneys and other law enforcement officials as well as officials of family or domestic relations courts. At the federal level, the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) provides technical assistance and funding to the states through the Office of Child Support Enforcement (OCSE) and also operates the Federal Parent Locator Service (FPLS), a computer matching system that locates non-custodial parents who owe child support. In addition, OCSE assists states in performing collection and enforcement services through the Federal Tax Refund Offset, Administrative Offset, Multistate Financial Institution Data Match, and Passport Denial programs.

What is the FPLS?

The FPLS is a national location system operated by OCSE, to assist states in locating non-custodial parents, putative fathers, and custodial parties for the establishment of paternity and child support obligations, as well as the enforcement and modification of orders for child support, custody and visitation. It also identifies support orders or support cases involving the same parties in different states. Developed in cooperation with the states, employers, federal agencies, and the judiciary, the FPLS was expanded by Welfare Reform to include two databases:

- The National Directory of New Hires (NDNH): a central repository of employment, unemployment insurance, and wage data from State Directories of New Hires, State Employment Security Agencies, and Federal Agencies. The NDNH has been operational since October 1, 1997.
- The Federal Case Registry (FCR): a national database that contains information on individuals in child support cases and child support orders. The FCR has been operational since October 1, 1998.

Additionally, the FPLS also has access to external locate sources such as the Internal Review Service (IRS), the Social Security Administration (SSA), Veterans Affairs (VA), the Department of Defense (DOD), and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI).

How does the FPLS support the states' IV-D child support programs?

The FPLS works in three ways to support state IV-D child support programs:

- First, the FPLS performs automatic locate functions. Using a process known as proactive matching, the FPLS compares data from the NDNH to data in the FCR. As soon as the FPLS finds that a non-custodial parent or custodial party in the FCR has a new job or is claiming unemployment insurance benefits or if quarterly wage information is available, it automatically notifies any state with a related child support case, so the state child support agency can take immediate action to establish, modify, or enforce a child support order. The FPLS also automatically performs an internal search that identifies all states that have a common interest in an individual in a child support action.
- Second, at the request of a state child support agency's Parent Locator Service, the FPLS will search various other federal agency databases (referred to as external locate sources) – such as the IRS or SSA – in an attempt to locate non-custodial parents and/or their assets, for the purpose of establishing or enforcing a child support order.
- Third, the FPLS can be used in certain circumstances to help enforce child custody and visitation orders, and to assist in cases of parental kidnapping.

Who may request information from the FPLS?

In child support cases, authorization to request information from the FPLS is limited to state IV-D agencies or agents/attorneys that represent those agencies to collect child and spousal support; certain courts or agents of the court; and, with limitations, state agencies that administer child welfare or foster care programs. In parental kidnapping, child custody, or visitation cases, certain agents and attorneys of the state or the court may request information from the FPLS. All requests for information from the FPLS must go through a State Parent Locator Service.

As a custodial party or non-custodial parent, may I request information from the FPLS?

Individuals may not make direct requests to the FPLS for information. You may be able to use the FPLS to help locate the other parent, without applying for full child support services, by working with the state or local IV-D agency. Any request to the FPLS for information must go through a State Parent Locator Service. In addition, in issues of parental kidnapping, custody or visitation, all requests must first go through the court.

Is the information in the database secure?

Federal law requires all states to protect the confidential information maintained by state IV-D agencies. At the Federal level, the Secretary of the DHHS has established and implemented safeguards for the FPLS that:

- Ensure the security, accuracy, and completeness of information.
- Restrict access to confidential information to authorized persons for authorized purposes.
- Require states to implement policies and procedures to ensure the integrity, accuracy, and completeness of data in their automated systems, and to prevent unauthorized use or disclosure of information related to the establishment or enforcement of child support.

All partners in the child support community recognize that ensuring the security of FPLS data is vital to the success of child support programs, and for protecting the privacy of American citizens.